

# D-Day anniversary a bitter reminder for some Canadians

In 1940, man of Italian origin was taken from his Rosemont home, branded an 'enemy alien'



SUSAN SEMENAK  
THE GAZETTE

Antonio Capobianco, 82, has been following the avalanche of D-Day anniversary news stories with a twinge of bitterness.

For reminiscences of World War II remind him of a lesser known, darker event in Canadian history.

It was the night of June 10, 1940, Italian dictator Benito Mussolini had just entered World War II on the side of the Nazis.

When Capobianco, then a 28-year-old unmarried accounting clerk, arrived home for supper he was greeted at his front door on Cartier St. in Rosemont by two police officers.

"Are you Italian?" they asked. He was handcuffed and taken to police headquarters, fingerprinted, photographed and incarcerated for a month in military barracks at St. Jean.

Branded a fascist sympathizer and an "enemy alien" although he was born in Canada, Capobianco was held at an internment camp in Petawawa, Ont., for 14 months.

He was not alone. By the time the RCMP's two-day sweep of Montreal's Little Italy district was over, 2,400 Italian males - some no older than 16 - had been rounded up and 236 of them were interned. Although many were detained for up to two years, none was ever charged with anything.

"As a Canadian I am proud to celebrate the 50th anniversary of D-Day and the Allied invasion of Europe," Capobianco, who still works full-time as an insurance broker, said in an interview.

"But it all reminds me of a sad period. I was picked up without any reason on the orders of an irresponsible gov-

ernment and treated like a common criminal. It was a grave injustice."

Capobianco said he still doesn't know how he could have been suspected of fascist activities. The son of parents who immigrated to Canada in 1904, he was a federal Liberal Party organizer. He had previously been granted special security clearance to work at the Port of Montreal.

And his brother Joseph was serving in the Canadian army as a lance corporal with the Black Watch (Royal Highland Regiment).

Capobianco said many of his compatriots who were interned with him had sons fighting overseas with the Allies.

Across Canada, 17,000 people of Italian background - many of them Canadian citizens - were arrested.

And under the War Measures Act, thousands of French Canadians and Canadians of Ukrainian, German, Chinese and Japanese origin were also detained.

In Ottawa, politicians would routinely and unabashedly rise in the House of Commons to denounce these "slimy subversive elements."

Renzo Orsi, president of the National Congress of Italian Canadians, said many Italian Canadians are still resentful of the humiliation and prejudice that their forebears suffered.

"But what many people resent most is that the Canadian government won't officially recognize the wrongdoing and provide some sort of redress to the community," Orsi said in an interview.

"Some families were totally devastated by being branded enemy aliens. Their kids were ostracized, their businesses fell by the wayside."

Orsi said the public apology that former prime minister Brian Mulroney

made in 1990 is not enough. He said the Italian community wants erased the criminal records of those who were arrested under the War Measures Act.

And it wants some form of compensation for the mistreatment, including financing for a foundation to promote Italian Canadian history and culture.

(In 1988, the Canadian government apologized to Japanese Canadians and allocated \$300 million as compensation for interning them and confiscating their property simply on the basis of their race.)

Michael Mirolla, who is writing a screenplay about the internment of Italian Canadians during the war, said many of the internees belonged to social clubs that supported the Italian Fascist Party.

But here in Montreal, the clubs - like the *Dopo Lavoro* (After Work) men's leisure club - were places for lonely new Canadians to eat familiar food, talk to people in their mother tongue and share stories about the old country.

"A lot of these people kept quiet about what happened to them for a long time because it was quite an embarrassment to have been arrested," Mirolla said in a telephone interview.

Even 50 years later, Capobianco is still leery about discussing that chapter in his life when he was forced to wear a blue-gray uniform with a red circle on the back - a target should he try to escape the camp where soldiers armed with machine guns guarded him.

"Make sure that people understand that I, too, am celebrating the Allied victory and the victory of democracy," he said. "Despite all the injustices done to me, I am still proud to be a Canadian."

GAZETTE, MARIE-FRANCE COALLIER

Antonio Capobianco: "Still proud to be a Canadian."